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The Kabyle Dress – From Folklore to Haute-Couture Statement: Algerian Berber Artist and Fashion Designer Khadidja Hamsi (1937 – 2021)

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Abstract

In early 1970s post-independence Algeria, the multifaceted artist and fashion-designer Khadidja Hamsi set herself the challenge of turning the traditional Kabyle dress into a sought-after contemporary garment, as a political statement of her Berber identity. The Kabyle dress was at the time relegated to an undervalued rural folklore. Contributing to the then nascent movement for the official recognition of Berber language and culture, Khadidja Hamsi explored and developed a distinctive style of Kabyle dress which saw this feminine symbol of Kabyle (Berber) identity become a piece of worn art. She revolutionized the Kabyle dress through the pioneering introduction of hand-embroidery and

geometrical symbols steeped in the ancient Berber heritage. Her motif compositions took up symbols of fertility, prosperity, and protection against the evil eye; they were made of exquisite hand embroidery, in a style she originated. Khadidja Hamsi approached each model creation as a form of artistic expression, treating fabrics and embroidery threads as a medium equivalent to painters' canvases. Her distinctive style has been copied by new generations of Algerian fashion designers who have, however, remained largely unaware of its originator and mistook its innovative use of embroidered Berber symbols as traditional practice.

KEYWORDS: Kabyle dress, Berber symbols, hand-embroidery

Introduction

In post-independence Africa, many fashion designers looked to express cultural identities. To this end, they have made innovative use of visual forms associated with traditional African cultures. This has sparked growing scholarly interest, in particular with respect to sub-Saharan Africa (for reviews, see Allman 2004; Rovine 2019; Richards 2022). However, comparatively little attention has been paid so far to the use of traditional forms in the fashion of the Maghreb. Here, the focus has been on Morocco (e.g., Becker 2006a, 2006b, Jansen 2015), while post-independence Algeria has only recently begun to attract attention (Belkaïd 2014; Belkaïd-Neri 2017). To help address this gap, this article will present the work of Algerian fashion designer and artist Khadidja Hamsi (1937–2021; see Figure 1), who drew on heritage Berber patterns and symbols to create a new style of Kabyle dress, as a contemporary statement of Berber identity. The Berbers (Amazigh, plural Imazighen, as they refer to themselves) are the autochthonous pre-Islamic population of North Africa that preserved its own language and culture, in the face of several waves of colonization. They represent a sizable minority, estimated at 20–25% of the Algerian population and 35–40% of the Moroccan population (Maddy-Weitzman 2011, 1). They are mainly concentrated in regions in which they constitute local majorities. One of these is the mountainous region of Kabylia in North Algeria, just east of the capital city of Algiers. Its Berber inhabitants are known as “Kabyles”.

Khadidja Hamsi was a multitalented Algerian artist who rose from self-taught beginnings to advance the preservation and development of Kabylia's Berber cultural heritage. She became best known for her pioneering fashion designs and innovations of Kabyle female attire, but her creativity encompassed various fields, including the study and popularization of ancient Berber geometric symbols, costume design for film and theater, collecting and interpreting traditional songs from the Soummam Valley (her tribal area) and interior decoration. She also



Figure 1

Portrait of Khadidja Hamsi taken by artiste photographer Samir Djama in 2016. From Khadidja Hamsi's Estate, © N Atmaoui-Fischer.

acted in a film adaptation of a Kabyle novel (Ifticène 1983). During her career Khadidja rubbed shoulders with key Berber intellectuals and artists in Algeria, including Mouloud Mammeri (1917–1989), Kateb Yacine (1929–1989), M'hamed Issiakhem (1928–1985), and Ben Mohamed (*1944). In 2018 the Algerian government commission for the rehabilitation and promotion of the Berber sphere (Haut Commissariat à l'Amazighité) celebrated her life achievements with an official tribute (for reviews of her work, see Reporters 2018a, 2018b; Algérie Presse Service 2018; Ibersiene 2018).

Khadidja's pioneering work on the Kabyle dress addressed the Berber identity issue in post-independence Algeria. This article will present the artist, discuss what motivated her to choose fashion to express her Berber identity, and explain how her work revolutionized the Kabyle dress.

Several African fashion designers using traditional forms (such as Shade Thomas-Fahm, Kofi Ansah, and Juliana Kweifio-Okai) were initially brought to academic attention through seminal work by their families who facilitated object-based study.¹ This article adds to this body of research. The author is the eldest daughter of the artist. The article is partially based on materials from Khadidja's Estate (see Figure 2), including:



Figure 2

Materials from Khadidja's Estate: Newspaper clipping (left) and Djoher Amhis' interview notes (right).

1. A folder of clippings from Algerian newspapers discussing her work, published in the period 1982–2021;
2. A set of handwritten notes written up by Algerian essayist Djoher Amhis, a long-time friend, from several interviews with the artist, conducted around the year 2014, in preparation for a book presenting Khadidja's life and work;
3. A collection of personal and professional photographs taken in connection either with exhibitions of her work or with the book project (that has not yet come to fruition).

These materials leave gaps, in particular concerning the beginning of her fashion work in the 1970s.² Where possible, these gaps have been addressed by recourse to oral testimony, from Khadidja, family members, and long-time friends, in conversation with the author.

Biography

Khadidja was born in 1937 in the city of Béjaïa, one of the two main cities of Kabylia (Figure 3), and the most ancient. Her mother, Baya Zerari, was a professional maker of traditional Bougiote dresses. Baya considered herself a *Bougiote*, a social class formed in the port city of Béjaïa of old urban families with Turkish or Andalusian descent, speaking a local Arabic dialect reflecting this heritage. Her father, Abdelkader



Figure 3

Topographic map of Kabylia in Northern Algeria. Source: adapted with permission from original image by Creative Commons user © Bourrichon. Supplementary red circles by author showing the cities of Algiers, Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou.

Hamsi, originated from the Kabyle tribe of Waghlis, where the family regularly returned, especially for festivities and social events like marriages.

Khadidja was the eldest of ten children. She did not receive any formal education during French occupation (1830–1962). Instead, she assisted her mother who taught her dressmaking. Baya taught her how to source fabrics and haberdashery, how to cut, sew and embroider traditional urban *Bougiote* clothes, while charging her with several house-keeping chores. Khadidja recounts: “My mother was a seamstress and made dresses for the Bougiotes ... At the age of ten, I started sewing dresses for the women in the neighborhood, at thirteen or fourteen I was preparing my trousseau” (Amhis 2012–2016, 3–5).³ In older age, Khadidja recalled her childhood as filled with hardship. Her only joyous moments of escape were with her paternal grandmother Yemma Taos, who told stories in the evenings, took children to religious Sufi meetings and to music events in Bejaia. Several family trips to the tribal Ait Waghlis area during important festivals and festivities had a lasting impact. Similar memories inspired her brother, visual artist Boubeker Hamsi (*1952) in his collection of paintings *La Terre est mon village*.⁴ They opened to her a fascinating feminine world beyond the confinements of her domestic urban life, where music, poetry and traditional crafts were embedded in their customs:

... fortunately, my paternal grandmother was there to sweeten my life ... With her, I attended the most beautiful bendir [traditional drum] sessions ... Despite all these daily difficulties, I was

immersed in an artistic environment where every occasion was an excuse to celebrate: wedding ceremonies in particular, which took place in the purest tradition with an immutable ritual enchanted me (Amhis 2012–2016, 3–5).⁵

It was on these trips that she learned to speak Kabyle, was initiated to various genres of women's poetry and lyrics, memorized the colors and details of their clothes, rugs, and other textiles. These short but magical periods in her childhood played an important role in the artistic legacy she left behind. They helped her cultivate a discerning eye for detail from a young age, and she developed a curiosity and thirst for knowledge of art, craft and culture, which accompanied her for the rest of her life.

She was 16 years old when she first married. With her first husband, she lived mainly in Algiers and then for a few years in Paris. In 1950s Algeria, "what horizon could be offered to a newly married young woman, if not the narrow confines of the house? [...] Urban wives live in the shadow of the husband, in his service and that of the children" (Zeghloul 1984, 7). In Paris, Khadidja enjoyed a semblance of independence, as she was allowed to leave the family home unchaperoned and to take up paid work. She worked in a hospital and indulged in her passion for fabrics and fashion in her free time. According to her sisters, this was when she started developing a personal style (Fatma Hamsi and Mouni Hamsi, pers. comm., December 26, 2022; Baya Hamsi, pers. comm., December 29, 2022).⁶ She went frequently to the districts of Marché St Pierre and Sentier, famous for their shops and boutiques of fabrics, textile, and haberdashery and frequented by fashion professionals. With her selected batch of fabrics, she complemented her wardrobe with her own cut and sewn pieces and started modifying the traditional *Bougiote* dress. These first dresses attracted the attention of family members and acquaintances and resulted in first, sparse, commissions.

After 15 years, the couple divorced due to childlessness. Khadidja returned to her parents' home in Bejaia but didn't stay there for long. Her second marriage soon after (1967) marked the beginning of a rich, politically engaged, social and cultural life. Her second husband, Bouzid Atmaoui, introduced her to left-wing intellectual and artistic circles in Algiers, which included the Berber writer Kateb Yacine, the painter M'hamed Issiakhem, and the poet Ben Mohammed (Amhis 2012–2016, 6).⁷ In the early 1970s, a few years after the birth of her three daughters, she actively joined the then nascent Berber cultural movement for the official recognition of Berber language and culture. The movement consisted then of often informal and unstructured groupings (Chaker 1992, 98). She extended the movement's cultural scope by reviving Kabyle textile art, a key medium of cultural heritage, and extending it from the traditional medium of rugs, to dresses. She held her first collective exhibition in 1976, at the then prominent Algiers Gallery of the

Union Nationale des Arts Plastiques (UNAP). Within a few years, her striking clothing and accessories creations caught the attention of the Algerian public beyond Kabylia and Algiers, of foreign diplomats posted in Algeria (Ibersiene 2018), and were worn by prominent Algerian singers including Idir, Karima, Djamel Allem and the music group Djurdjura (Ait Ferroukh 1997).⁸ At the peak of her creativity, she ran a boutique (1982 – 1989) in the Artisan village of the cultural and commercial center of Riadh-El-Feth in Algiers as well as an atelier with seven women hand-embroiderers she had trained, and received commissions from the Algerian government. She held several individual and collective exhibitions in Algeria and abroad, mainly in France and Belgium.⁹ She passed away in Algiers, in 2021.

Contexts

Political context: Algerian government policy toward its Berber communities

Like most African countries which gained their independence in the 1960s, Algeria strived to forge a new national and cultural identity to supplant the colonial one (Welling 2015, 90). Algeria hosted the first Pan-African Cultural Festival in 1969 in Algiers, to celebrate Africa's diverse and rich identities and cultures (Bedjaoui 2018). More broadly, Algeria played a leading role in African and world events, including the Third World Project, a collective attempt to establish political and economic sovereignty for the former colonial world, and the Nonaligned Movement, and supported the independence movements of African countries remaining under colonial control (Byrne 2016). The *zeitgeist* of this crucial period is well captured in the documentary film *Alger la Mecque des révolutionnaires (1962–1974)* (Salama 2017).¹⁰

Anti-colonialist politics at the international level, however, went hand in hand with cultural repression at home. The post-independence ideology of the Algerian government was pan-Arabic. Non-Arab indigenous folk cultures were regarded as a threat to national unity (Chaker 1992, 100; Maas 2014, 7–8).¹¹ Right upon independence, the Algerian state accordingly started a cultural revolution with a nationwide Arabization program including in education and administration, together with acts of suppression, censorship, cancellation of anything referring to the heterogeneous fabric of Algerian society (Aïtel 2013, 64–70; Chaker 1992, 98–99; Maddy-Weitzman 2011, 67–79). Examples include the suppression of university courses in Berber language and culture, the reduction of transmission strength of the Kabyle radio station (Chaîne 2), and the removal of Berber names from the register of accepted names.

These efforts were met with public protests in Kabylia and Algiers and culminated in 1980 with the “Berber Spring”: mass riots, protests and strikes by students, villagers, factory workers, and businesses. They

were ignited by the last-minute cancellation of a lecture by the linguist Mouloud Mammeri on Kabyle poetry, where more than one thousand students were waiting for him (Maddy-Weitzman 2011, 80). This event, for the first time, placed the question of ethnic and linguistic diversity at the center of political discourse in the Maghreb (Aïtel 2013, 63; Sini 2015, 445). Post-1980, the Berber (Amazigh) cultural movement progressively became a “transnational phenomenon of ethnocultural assertion that cuts across national boundaries”, to spread all over North Africa and the diaspora (Maddy-Weitzman 2011, 7–8).

Cultural context: Wider and personal

Despite the restrictive actions of the Algerian government, a dynamic cultural scene emerged in Algiers, where Khadidja and Bouzid lived. During its “gestation phase” in the 1960s and 1970s, the Berber movement relied mainly on publications, teaching events, and cultural activities revolving around some intellectuals, who prominently included Mouloud Mammeri (Chaker 1992, 98–99). The extensive use of audio cassettes from the mid-1970s helped the dissemination of a new Kabyle song genre “Nouvelle chanson Kabyle”, spread awareness of Berber identity to a larger social base in Algeria, and increased the national and international recognition of Berber culture (Chaker 1992, 98; Aïtel 2013, 70–71; Maas 2014, 252–254).¹²

The visual arts scene benefited from the creation, in 1964, of an artists’ union or professional organization common across several post-colonial countries (Cubbon 2018): The *Union Nationale des Arts Plastiques* (UNAP) brought together the few Algerian painters of the period, to work toward an Algerian image “breaking away from the domination of Western art associated with colonization” (Laggoune-Aklouche 2007, 113). Their work represented various esthetic forms including figurative and abstract art, miniature art, and illuminations. One affiliated artists’ collective, the group Aouchem (1967–1972), used traditional Berber signs and symbols found on tattoos, rock paintings and engravings, tapestry and on other popular crafts to fashion a contemporary Berber pictorial identity (Belhachemi 2018; Bedrici 2022).

Khadidja and Bouzid participated in this cultural life, frequenting various places of cultural expression like the *Cinémathèque*, cine-clubs, literary evenings at the *Mouggar* hall, and the *Théâtre des Travailleurs* of Kateb Yacine.¹³ These events were often followed by long and intense debates and catalyzed the development of a network of likeminded intellectuals, authors and artists who were not necessarily Berber (Mohamed 2016, 43; Chabani 2009, 19). They often gathered at each other’s homes. Members including Bouzid and Khadidja hosted cultural *salons* which involved lively discussions. The iconic Kabyle singer Idir aptly summed up their outlook at the time: “We were proud to have a country that defeated French colonialism, proud to be the lighthouse of the third-world, non-alignment and progressive ideas that were in vogue in

the 1970s” (Saïd 2018). Among the members of this network who most influenced and encouraged Khadidja were:

- i. Playwriter and director Kateb Yacine, who promoted the use of the colloquial Arabic of the Maghreb countries (Daridja) and the teaching of Algeria’s pre-Islamic history,
- ii. Modern painter M’hamed Issiakhem, founding member of the artists’ union UNAP (see above), who promoted the reappropriation of the country’s artistic heritage, free from orientalist (mis)representations,
- iii. Poet, song writer, and radio presenter Ben Mohammed, who regarded women as vital players in the preservation and (oral) transmission of Kabyle identity; he wrote lyrics of songs and worked with Khadidja who interpreted them in the film titled *Les Rameaux de Feu* (Ifticène 1983);¹⁴ and
- iv. Author, linguist, and anthropologist Mouloud Mammeri. Mammeri headed the research center CRAPE (Center de Recherche Anthropologique, Préhistorique et Ethnographique) based in the Bardo Museum of Algiers (1969–1979) and promoted the importance of fieldwork for the preservation and analysis of predominantly oral cultural heritage. Khadidja visited the center several times and met Mammeri and other members of his team, who helped her in her quests with relevant books from the center’s library, and guidance when doing fieldwork (Lila Fal and Farida Wolf, pers. comm., January 01, 2023; Fatma Hamsi and Mouni Hamsi, pers. comm., December 26, 2022; Baya Hamsi, pers. comm., December 29, 2022; Boubeker Hamsi, pers. comm., January 01, 2023).¹⁵

Fashion context: Bougiote and Kabyle dresses

After Algeria’s independence in 1962, the Algerian government ignored the dress culture as an aspect of national identity for a long time and did not support fashion related activities such as the establishment of fashion design departments in the arts colleges and universities and of professional organizations that promote fashion events (Belkaïd-Neri 2017, 294–295). Rather, the interest and efforts came from individual initiatives among fashion designers. Two fashion labels created in 1963, *Yasmina* and *Nassila*, are considered the doyennes of Algerian haute couture. Based in Algiers, they took inspiration first from the traditional garments of Algiers, then in the 1980s from other regional outfits (Chabani 2004; Mechaï 2016). However, more research needs to be done on the fashion scene, especially on the popularity of “ready-to-wear” versus “custom made” in the first decade post-independence.

Khadidja was initially trained to make Bougiote dresses (see Figure 4). Due to a rich history that saw the emergence of various dynasties in the Middle Ages and the contribution of Andalusian and

Figure 4
Women heading to a wedding celebration in summer, wearing a dark blue Bougiote dress (right) and a light Algiers' outfit (left) in late 1960s. Courtesy of Khadidja's sister Mouni Hamsi.



Ottoman influences, Bejaia was an Arab and cosmopolitan capital city amidst Kabylia, where especially after the Spanish Reconquista (completed in 1492), Arabs and Kabyles coexisted with Andalusians of various faiths and Christians from different areas of origin (Cote 1991). They all influenced this city's clothing landscape, similarly to that developed in the eastern Algerian cities of Constantine and Annaba. According to Belkaïd (2003, 67) the dresses perpetuate a decorative style belonging to a common Mediterranean repertoire, with luxurious pieces enriched with silk embroidery or with gold, silver and bead embroidery.

While Khadidja grew up familiar with the production of urban Bougiote dresses, her creative attention was primarily focused on the rural Kabyle dresses. These are distinctively different from Bougiote dresses and have a different historical evolution. Kabyle dresses are traditionally rural garments of calve-length to allow easy movement. They are typically everyday garments although more elaborate versions are worn for special celebrations. Their historical evolution since antiquity was studied in detail by Belkaïd (2003, 102) and later by Pichault (2007, 101). Of particular interest is the *taqendurt* dress, which became the base of the female Kabyle outfit after the Second World War and which Khadidja was familiar with when starting her work in the early 1970s. It is still worn today during celebrations and festivals, and there are various local variations; but the *taqendurt* dress is characterized by its simple cut. It is typically made from cotton, either dyed in one color (mainly in white or yellow) or printed with small flowers (Figure 5). It has a small V-neckline, front and back yokes, $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeves ending with band cuffs, and the front and back panels are stitched to the yokes through gatherings. Embellishments include wool or synthetic trims and rick rack braids, which edge the collar, front and back yokes, band cuffs and the lower dress rims. The dress is typically completed with 3 other pieces forming together an outfit: (1) the *amendil*, fringed headscarves tied so that the women's neck and ears are free, (2) the *agus*, a multi-colored woolen belt ending with tassels, and (3) the *foutas*, which are yellow, red and black striped fabrics, wrapped and knotted around the waist. Today, the *amendil*, *fouta* and *agus* are optionally worn, especially among the young generation, and "Kabyle dress" is the generic and popular term used for the Kabyle outfit that includes the "taqendurt".

Khadidja's innovation of the Kabyle dress

Trigger

In the early 70s, Khadidja challenged herself to turn the traditional Kabyle dress into a contemporary garment and statement of cultural identity. Her "lightbulb moment" came after watching *L'Opium et le Bâton* (Rachedi 1971), a feature film based on a Mouloud Mammeri novel set in a Kabyle village during the Algerian war of independence. In her interviews, conference talks, and private conversations, Khadidja



Figure 5
Kabyle outfit from the 1970s worn today: Dancers at a festival in Kabylia in white *tagendurt* dress embellished with trims and rick rack braids, black-yellow-red striped *fouta* wrapped around the waist, and *amendil*, fringed headscarves tied also around the hips. Source: with permission from original image by Creative Commons user © Koukoumani.

explained that the film affected her in two ways (Ait Ferroukh 1997; Tighilt 2018; Hamsi 2018).¹⁶ Firstly, the film demonstrated the tremendous courage and resilience of Kabyle village women in the face of misery and military action. Their outfits reflected their grit and embodied, to her mind, the steadfastness of Kabyle identity. Secondly, the main female protagonist was played by the prominent French-Corsican actress Marie-José Nat, who was depicted wearing the Kabyle outfit and jewelry, which people then wanted to emulate.

This film, which was aired on national Algerian television, sparked a “revival of the Kabyle dress” in Kabylia itself, where women and girls were seen proudly wearing the outfit described above (*tagendurt* dresses with *fouta* and *amendil*), without major changes, in public, at celebrations and in daily life (Hamsi 2018). However, in the cities such as Algiers and Bejaia, the Kabyle dress was seen as outdated and rural, “women wore it for housework and at best as an indoor dress” (Zeghloul 1984) or became “object of curiosity for tourists in search of exoticism and local color” (Malika 1984). Khadidja explained it was regarded with contempt and interpreted as a sign of low social status (Hamsi 2018). Thus she “had the idea of transforming the traditional dress, modernizing it, making it more functional, more adapted [to modern life], less exotic, while remaining authentic” (Malika 1984).

Experimentation and modifications

Khadidja’s unique and original style is instantly recognizable today, yet it took her many years to achieve.

Her first dresses, in the 1970s, saw the use of cuts that were perceived as combining “authenticity” and “modernity” (Malika 1984; Ibersiene 2018). They were influenced on the one hand, by the *tagendurt* dresses she had seen at weddings in Kabylia and, on the other hand, by contemporary fashion trends that resonated with the North African public and were to be seen on the streets of Algiers. These included the folklore trend consisting of abundant floral and other nature motifs, a sober neutral color palette of black, white and earth tones, the Granny and kaftan dresses with their empire waistlines and flared sleeves embraced by the contemporaneous “hippie” and feminist movements (Lutyens and Hislop 2009). For her first collection, exhibited at the Union Nationale des Arts Plastiques Gallery in 1976, she lengthened the Kabyle dress, to make it full-length, meant to be worn with mid- to high-heel shoes. She replaced the traditional small flower fabrics with ones printed with large flowers, the bright colors with black-and-white or muted earthy tones (Figure 6). She replaced gatherings with pleats. The sleeves, which consisted of wide-winged arms, illustrated her desire to incorporate elements from the urban *Bougiote* garments into her contemporary Kabyle dresses. The V-neck became deeper, and the front and back yokes larger, often cut in uniformly colored fabrics that complement or balance the main dress body. This



Figure 6
Dresses from Khadidja's first collective exhibition in 1976. Note the fabrics printed with large flower motifs and the wide flared sleeves in fashion in the 1970s. The black and white dress (first from right) shows the introduction of floral motifs hand-embroidered on the front yokes (previously unused on traditional Kabyle dresses). From Khadidja Hamsi's Estate, © N Atmaoui-Fischer.



Figure 7
Khadidja's experimentation with beading technique. The yokes, the arms endings, and the belt of this pale blue satin occasion dress are adorned with satin bands and other trims, and enhanced with sequins and glass beads and tubes in linear patterns (previously unused on traditional Kabyle dresses). from Khadidja's Estate, © N Atmaoui-Fischer.

allowed the introduction of her first hand-embroideries, consisting of subtle floral motifs inspired by the fabric prints. During this initial period, she used embellishments consisting of ribbons and rick rack braids characteristic of the original Kabyle dresses. She sometimes enhanced these embellishments with beads and sequins typically used on *Bougiote* dresses. An example of this type of embellishment is shown in Figure 7. The yokes, the arms ending with bands, and the belt of a pale blue satin dress are adorned with satin bands and other trims, together with sequins and glass beads and tubes in linear patterns. These simple yet captivating dresses were unusual and reflected the many aspects of herself and her attempts to explore her dual urban and rural identity. Their distinctive fusion style attracted the admiration of her family members and acquaintances, who became her first customers (Fatma Hamsi and Mouni Hamsi, pers. comm., December 26, 2022; Baya Hamsi, pers. comm., December 29, 2022).¹⁷

Becoming increasingly daring in her experimentation with various fabrics, patterns and colors, she would use cotton and brocade fabrics with geometrical patterns. Later she would add cotton satin, crepes and silk fabrics in the most vibrant colors, and around 1980 she became the first Algerian known to use sari fabrics to cut her dresses, well before saris became fashionable in Algeria in the 1990s (Belkaïd-Neri 2017, 297). Through her intense discussions with many of her customers, the idea of replacing the *agus* wool belts with wide ones made of the same dress fabric appeared (Kaisa Meddahi, pers. comm., April 2022).¹⁸ Meant to emphasize the waist, these were first decorated with ribbons, they later would also be embroidered. The black-yellow-red lined *fouta* was modified into a gathered open skirt made of either pastel or contrasting color fabrics. She also experimented for a brief period with painting Berber geometric symbols on fabrics and used the *appliqué* technique to highlight triangular shapes cut in a contrasting reflective or shiny fabric (Figure 8).

Khadidja's pioneering innovation – embroidered Berber symbols

Khadidja avidly collected Kabyle artifacts including enameled silver jewelry with coral cabochons, which she wore on various occasions, as well as pottery and rugs with which she decorated her home (Figure 9).¹⁹ These artifacts are decorated with geometric motifs that Gabriel Camps and his research team dated to protohistoric origins (reviewed by Benkada 2003). According to Makilam (2000, 2007), the symbols represent a specifically feminine esoteric writing form transmitted through the ages by Kabyle women of which they were the only depositories in traditional society.

Thanks to her cousin, the journalist Zhor Zerari, who gave her an illustrated book on Kabyle motifs painted on walls (Devulder 1958), the world of signs and symbols became an impetus for her exploration and



Figure 8

Khadidja's experimentation with appliqué technique. This pink occasion dress is made of an opaque material and has triangular purple appliqués cut in a contrasting reflective fabric. From Khadidja's Estate, © N Atmaoui-Fischer.

integration of these thousand-year-old patterns into her creations (Chabani 2009; Zeghloul 1984). "Khadidja Hamsi has thus given the Kabyle dress a real revival, by introducing to it ancient signs and symbols" (Hassina 2021). As she explained to a journalist (Zeghloul 1984), Khadidja did so in reaction to the disappearance of Algeria's artistic craftsmanship that, she thought, must be perpetuated through innovation so as not to break the thread to previous generations. According to her daughters and sisters, Khadidja subsequently visited the library of the Bardo Museum in Algiers several times and undertook field trips to rural Kabylia, to elicit the historical and perceived meanings of these



Figure 9

Khadidja's home decoration with collected Kabyle artifacts and her own creations. Berber symbols and patterns are everywhere: on the carpets and other textiles, the pottery (up left), painted on the wall, and on her own designs like cushions, lamp shades and hanging shawl (center). From Khadidja's Estate, © N Atmaoui-Fischer.

symbols (Lila Fal and Farida Wolf, pers. comm., January 01, 2023; Fatma Hamsi and Mouni Hamsi, pers. comm., December 26, 2022; Baya Hamsi, pers. comm., December 29, 2022; Amhis 2012–2016, 6).²⁰ On the field trips, she interviewed the female artisans who used these symbols in pottery, weaving, and wall decoration. The motifs are directly linked to Nature and women's life cycles, and symbolize fertility and prosperity, while other geometric patterns are believed to protect against the evil eye and spirits, among other things (Makilam 2000).

This research inspired her distinctive new style, her signature. This involved two key innovations:

1. **Symbols on dresses:** Whereas the Berber symbols discussed above had been previously used only on pottery, in weaving, and for wall decoration, she used them to adorn her Kabyle dresses, most extensively on wedding and occasion dresses.
2. **Hand-Embroidery:** In Kabylia decorative Berber patterns had previously been woven into textiles (such as rugs, though not clothing) (Belkaïd 2003; Pichault 2007). Khadidja's innovation was to have the symbols hand-embroidered onto dresses.

She took embroidery stitches from various sources. Khadidja commented:

When it comes to embroidery, the stitches used for some were of Slavic origin, except for Tithbirin. Starting with these stitches and the patterns found in weavings and pottery, I created Berber embroidery stitches, choosing those that suit this style. (Malika 1984)

A preliminary analysis points to a wider combination of embellishment techniques in her subsequent work. While her motifs are made up of contemporary basic stitches, such as chain, herringbone and satin stitches, others are probably inspired from Berber regions of Mزاب (northern Sahara Desert, Algeria), Gabès in southern Tunisia (Paine 1995, 131; Stone 1985, 128), and Siwa in western Egypt (Paine 1995, 80), and probably from the Indian sub-continent. To illustrate this point, Figure 10 shows the lower part of a black skirt, which has been embellished with a combination of bright-colored trims of different widths, appliqués made of dark but shiny fabrics, and the application of silver mirror sequins. The band is enhanced throughout with hand-embroidered stitches like chain, chevron and satin



Figure 10

Embroidery stitches of various origins. The lower part of the black skirt has been embellished with bright-colored trims of different widths and appliqués made of dark and shiny fabrics. The technique of silver mirror sequins is probably Indian or Siwan (Western Egypt) origin. The hand-embroidered stitches like chain, chevron and satin stitches are quite universal, whereas the stitch surrounding the mirror sequins on the lower band, named "tithbirin", is typical Berber from Mزاب region (Northern Sahara Desert, Algeria) and represents dove's feet. From Khadidja's Estate, © N Atmaoui-Fischer.

stitches, and the typical Berber stitch named “tithbirin”, mentioned above, representing dove’s feet.

However, the process was creative. She considered every garment as a unique work of art, created in a process that treated fabrics and embroidery threads like a painter’s canvas and paintbrushes. She credits the painter M’hamed Issiakhem with encouraging her to see the whole front and back dress panels as potential canvases, instead of limiting the embroidery of motifs to yokes, wrists and lower rim. The Berber motifs, those transmitted through the ages, and some created on her own, became a vocabulary reinterpreted and arranged in novel artistic compositions. In one of her interviews, she gave a glimpse of her creative process, saying “I take advantage of my insomnia, during which I plunge into a world of creation where I distinguish the patterns and colors of the work that I do the next day” (Oubachir 2010).

This initial visualization of patterns and colors took a layered approach, where the general patterns’ forms are first drawn on the fabrics and then embroidered, followed by several iterations that refine the details until the whole embroidered picture conforms to her vision. Mustapha Bouamama, then head of the École Supérieure des Beaux-Arts of Algiers said,

... she could indeed be viewed as an artist who works from cold, guided solely by an absolute mastery of her craft. Certainly, there is mastery... but Khadidja breathes her soul into it. Inspiration with her is spontaneous and goes hand in hand with the creative process, and the two phenomena stimulate and enliven each other mutually ... The harmonious blending of colors and shapes is nothing short of symphonic... Geometrical patterns and designs can be traced back ... thousands of years, yet they leave room for innovation. Some abstract shapes appear to be the artist’s own creation. Others immerse us in the ancient Berber imaginary, in the magic world of symbolism and of votive, prophylactic, religious, and mystical meanings... (Bouamama 1999)

Like many artists, Khadidja also drew inspiration from her travels. Particularly important were trips to Kenya (1996) and South Africa (2000), in whose traditional crafts she took great interest. In Nairobi, she interviewed the women craft sellers in the Massai market about materials, motifs, and colors. In Kenya and South Africa (with their large Indian populations), she procured hand-embroidered saris which she transformed into unique Kabyle dresses, building on her previous use of sari fabrics (Lila Fal and Farida Wolf, pers. comm., January 01, 2023).²¹

She designed dresses for a variety of functions, including for daily use and for receiving friends and visitors at home (tea parties). These dresses were trimmed with cotton and rick rack braids and embellished with either discrete embroidery or beads. Her most elaborate creations, however, were occasion and wedding dresses: unique made-to-measure



Figure 11

Elaborately embroidered peach wedding dress made of silk satin fabric. The dress is thoroughly hand-embroidered with brightly colored silk threads. The Berber motifs are patterned with mainly satin, chevron and chain stitches, and complemented by lines of "tithbirin". From Khadidja's Estate, © N Atmaoui-Fischer.

pieces cut in expensive colored fabrics, mainly silk. She revolutionized the appearance of the Kabyle wedding pieces. The white *tagendurt* and the yellow, red and black striped *fouta* (see Figure 5) previously worn at weddings were replaced with vivid unicolored fabrics that complement each other and that are heavily silk embroidered (Figure 11 and Figure 12). She also had the idea to embroider veils worn either attached to the back of the head or to the front yokes of the dress with fibulae (Figure 13), as well as white burnouses, hooded long and ample capes worn traditionally in the Maghreb region of North Africa by the brides



Figure 12

Elaborately hand-embroidered red silk fouta, usually worn as an open skirt over a wedding dress. The wide embroidered yellow belt comes on top to accentuate the waist. The basic triangular and lozenge shapes are embroidered in various patterns and harmonious colors. Motif compositions are separated by white satin bands edged in silver trim and embroidered with red "tithbirin". From Khadidja's Estate, © N Atmaoui-Fischer.

on their wedding day (Figure 14). The whole production process from the initial concept to finished pieces was extremely time consuming, especially the hand-embroidery of a single piece took in average two years (Malika 1984; pers. comm., March-April 2023).²² Khadidja refused adamantly to use embroidery machines and invested instead in the training of women, usually from her Algiers neighborhood, in this needlecraft. For two decades, her atelier had up to seven hand-embroiderers.²³

Figure 13

White veil (voile) hand-embroidered with silk threads. The design composition evokes a large Berber pectoral fibula (brooch) with its pin and catch at the top. Khadidja made the veil attached to the back of the bride's head or to the front yokes of the dress with two fine fibulae. From Khadidja's Estate, © N Atmaoui-Fischer.



Reception and Impact

Client base

Her client base was diverse and evolved with time, along two trajectories: She created and made dresses for “ordinary citizens, but also for great personalities, following the example of Ms. Chadli”, wife of previous Algerian president Chadli Bendjedid [1979–1992] (Reporters 2018a). On the one hand, a first client base was provided by family and friends and grew through word of mouth, primarily within the Kabyle community. On the other hand, following her first exhibitions (at the UNAP Gallery) in the mid-1970s, an important catalyst was provided by uptake by the European expat community in Algiers, in the late 1970s. In Khadidja's words (with slight overstatement):



Figure 14

Natural white Burnous, long open cape with hood made of a cotton-wool mix, worn during wedding ceremonies. Traditionally plain, Khadidja embroidered this one with her Berber symbols composition, and edged the rims with crocheted trims. From Khadidja's Estate, © N Atmaoui-Fischer.

Who do you think was first interested in my work? Western women! There were then foreign technical cooperation workers who came with their wives [who bought my dresses]... I started making exhibitions at embassies, like Germany [German Democratic Republic] and France (Hamsi 2018)²⁴

According to Djoher Amhis (2018), some male diplomats also acquired her dresses as collection items for esthetic reasons, thus acknowledging their status as works of art.²⁵ Seeing her dresses worn by the foreign women at functions, many spouses of Algerian government officials started to value her Kabyle dresses as expression of an *Algerian* heritage and identity, and became her customers (Hamsi 2018; Reporters 2018a). This expanded her client base beyond families with Kabyle background. Subsequently, in the 1980s, the Algerian presidency commissioned dresses, shawls and cushions, for use as diplomatic gifts (Hamsi 2018).

While her creations covered a wide range of genres and price ranges, the mainstay of her business was provided by elaborate wedding and occasion dresses. Weddings are the most important social

events in North African societies, and are often prepared years in advance, as mothers build up over time their daughter's trousseau, which may include several occasion dresses. These are also worn at domestic receptions, where families invite friends and acquaintances for major events like betrothals, circumcisions, return from the *Hadj*, and commemorations of deceased family members. While production and selling started at home, where her atelier was based, Khadidja established her sole boutique in 1982, in the Artisan village of the cultural and commercial center of Riadh-El-Feth in Algiers, in response to her growing client base.

Khadidja also designed costumes for the feature film *La Montagne de Baya* (Meddour 1997), for the theater play *Rak Khouya Wana Echoun* (Benaïssa 1990) (see review by Belgacem 2021), and for prominent Kabyle female singers including Karima (*1959), and the group Djurdjura (Ait Ferroukh, 1997).

Media Impact

Khadidja gave several interviews and participated in various public talks, TV and radio programs (e.g., ENTV, TV4 Tamazight, Radio Alger Chaîne 2, Radio Soummam) and festivals. Toward the end of her life, further media coverage was attracted through events that celebrated her life achievements. In 2018, the cultural center of the city of Tizi Ouzou organized a “Fête de la robe Kabyle”, celebration of Kabyle dresses, around her work (Tighilt 2018). In the same year, the Haut Commissariat à l'Amazighité (HCA, Government commission for Berber culture) celebrated her life achievements with an official tribute event which included talks by several of the producers and presenters of the TV and radio programs that had covered her work. They highlighted Khadidja's atypical journey (for reviews of her work, see Reporters 2018a, 2018b; Algérie Presse Service 2018; Ibersiene 2018). However, further work is required to collect, research, and analyze available audio-visual materials.

Impact on Berber fashion design

Her success in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a great demand which she could not accommodate (Malika 1984). Consequently, her models have been extensively copied during the last decades. To limit copycat work, Khadidja closed her sole boutique in Algiers 1989 and later refused to advertise her work on websites or social media platforms when this became the commercial norm in Algeria (Khadidja Hamsi, pers. comm., Spring 2016).²⁶ As a result, many young Berber fashion stylists such as *Orientale Tendance*, *Atelier Les 3 Fleurs* and *Nina Création Berbère* are unaware of Khadidja as originator of her distinctive colorful and embellished Kabyle styles of dress, and even of

the innovative nature of its use of symbols on dresses, and of the style's roots in the conscious reassertion of autochthonous Berber culture.

How Khadidja's designs became highly influential in today's fashion design in Algeria still needs to be researched. To this effect, HCA's president El Hachemi Assad appealed to scholars to study her work and declared during the homage ceremony,

... this speech is mainly intended for our university partners... in the framework of this program... the legacy of this great lady is a legacy to be shared, transcribed and transmitted... and it is important to create this bridge with young academics who are interested in heritage... The HCA will take charge of all this wealth brought by the artist to make it available to the general public and specialists. (Reporters 2018b)

Conclusion

The self-taught artist Khadidja Hamsi revolutionized the traditional Kabyle dress and left a lasting impact on the Berber fashion design in modern Algeria. Her work was largely motivated by the desire to contribute to the reassertion of autochthonous Berber culture in the face of oppression by post-independence Algerian governments driven by pan-Arab ideology. Her unique and original style saw the pioneering use of hand-embroidery and use of traditional Berber symbols, which previously had seen decorative use only on murals, pottery, and rugs. She innovatively used vibrantly colored alternative base fabrics such as satin and crepe and was the first Algerian known to use sari fabrics. She modified the Kabyle outfit by substituting the wool belts (*agus*) with wide belts made of the same dress fabric, and by replacing the black-yellow-red lined fabrics that were knotted around the waist (*foutas*) with gathered open skirts made of either pastel or contrasting color fabrics. In her hands, what was once an undervalued piece of rural folklore became a piece of worn art.

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Notes

1. Fauzi Fahm, son of designer Shade Thomas-Fahm, runs an Instagram page about the designer: <https://www.instagram.com/officialshadethomasfahm/>. He facilitated interviews with the designer and himself which are referenced in Checinska (2022). Kofi Ansah's children set up a foundation (<https://www.kofiansahfoundation.com/>) which archives and shares the legacy of their father (see <https://www.instagram.com/kofiansahfoundation/>). Richards' (2022) discussion of Kweifio-Okai heavily relies on family information. For these up-to-date examples, I am indebted to the editors of this Special Issue.
2. In addition, the evidentiary value of these materials is limited by the following factors: (1) Several of the newspaper clippings lacked information about the venue or date of publication; this paper only uses articles that could be traced back to their source. (2) There do not seem to be any recordings or transcripts of Amhis' interviews with Khadidja; literal quotes from Khadidja are integrated into narrative passages, without sourcing to specific dates. The notes are organized into short chapters, pages are numbered within chapters. (3) Not all images come with information about time and place of capture.
3. Amhis, unpublished interviews, Ch. 'Une enfance au pays', 3,5. Author's translation from original French. All quotes in this paper have been translated by the author from either French or Kabyle.
4. See Hamsi, Boubeker, *La Terre est Mon Village* Exhibition March 4–30, 2016, Musée Charlier, Brussels. <https://www.hamsi.be/2017/12/05/la-terre-est-mon-village-2/>.
5. Amhis, unpublished interviews, Ch. 'Une enfance au pays', 3–5.
6. Author's phone conversations with Khadidja's sisters Fatma Hamsi, Mouni Hamsi and Baya Hamsi in December 2022.
7. Khadidja recounts: 'I married Bouzid Atmaoui, with whom I had three daughters. With him I entered another world, that of books and meetings with intellectuals. With him I rubbed shoulders with renowned personalities: Ali Zamoum, Kateb Yacine, Issiakhem, doctor Bouchek, Asselah, Azzedine Meddour, Ben Mohamed. With all these great men, I evolved in art: poetry, painting, music, writing and I measured the real value of our heritage which is often devalued, and even ignored...' Amhis, unpublished interviews, Ch. 'Une enfance au pays', 6.
8. "Khadidja: Les voies de la création artistique", *El Moudjahid*, weekend edition 9–10 March 1984; "Khadidja: Une artiste algérienne a la conquête de Bruxelles", *Liberté*, 10 Jan 1995; for later sales exhibitions and comments on how quickly they sold out, see Ancer (2008) "Khadidja Hamsi, une artiste qui rêve ses œuvres", *El Watan*, 19–20 December 2008.

9. Her Estate includes an incomplete list of exhibitions in the period 1976–1994 prepared for an exhibition in the Centre des Art – Bastion 23, Algiers, by the organizers, the Lions Club Alger La Citadelle. It lists exhibitions at UNAP Algiers (1976), Faculté Centrale d’Alger (April 1981), Brussels (1982), Embassy of Spain, Algiers (1983). Oslo, Norway (1984), Moscow, Russia (1986), Festival of Berber Culture, Brussels (Dec 1994).
10. Documentary *Alger, la Mecque des Révolutionnaires (1962–1974)*, directed by Ben Salama, was aired for a limited time in May 2017, on the French-German Television channel ARTE. However, one can still watch it on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u3M4-2sD3f8> to get a good idea of the political atmosphere during that period.
11. As Maas (2014, 114) explains: ‘Algeria is made up of groups speaking a wide range of Arabic and Berber dialects, and the birth of a unitary nation-state called for a common written form to succeed (or complement) French. Classical Arabic was and remains largely the preserve of those educated in madrasas. There was not yet in 1962 a widely mastered form of standardized modern Arabic; and local dialects, either Arabic or Berber, were considered unsuitable vehicles of nationalism because they represented a form of ‘popular’ oral culture out of step with the modernizing project of the centralized state.’
12. Some Kabyle protest/political singers (*chanteurs engagés*) like Idir or Ait Manguellet became hugely popular, with a Berber fan base across the country and in the diaspora. They were valued for their ability to ‘present Kabyle realities in the most universally accessible way possible’ (Maas 2014, 243–244).
13. The *Cinémathèque* is a public institution which distributes, collects, and preserves Algerian films. The *Salle El Mouggar* is a cultural space for cinema, shows, exhibitions and conferences, which welcomed world celebrities. The *Théâtre des Travailleurs* theater troupe performed between 1971 and 1977 under the aegis of Kateb Yacine in colloquial Algerian Arabic.
14. Khadidja appears in the film in a poet-bard’s role, inspired by the Aede in the epic story telling of ancient Greece.
15. Author’s discussions with Khadidja’s close family members (her daughters Lila Fal and Farida Wolf, her sisters Mouni Hamsi, Fatma Hamsi and Baya Hamsi, and brother, artist Boubeker Hamsi, who worked a few years in CRAPE) (December 2022–January 2023).
16. The author has also recorded Khadidja in a public talk (Hamsi, 2018), where she describes the cultural and political background of her beginnings and gave more details on how the film affected her.
17. Author’s phone conversations with Khadidja’s sisters Fatma Hamsi, Mouni Hamsi and Baya Hamsi in December 2022.

18. Author's discussions with Khadidja's long-time friend, customer, and collector Mrs. Kaisa Meddahi (April 2022).
19. Since the mid-1990s, Khadidja invested a lot of time in the construction and interior decoration of a summer house, inspired by traditional Kabyle architecture, close to the Kabyle sea-side town of Azeffoun. One of her dreams was to turn the house into a museum, which would house her large collection of Kabyle artefacts, along with some of her own work. She abandoned the project in 2017, due to lack of interest and help from the relevant Algerian institutions.
20. See also Amhis, unpublished interviews, Ch. 'Une enfance au pays', p.6. 'With my husband Bouzid, I did research on Mediterranean symbols and their meaning in works of art, pottery, rugs, decorative objects.'
21. Author's discussions with Khadidja on inspiration and travels (2012–2016). Also testimonial of Khadidja's three daughters Nassima Atmaoui-Fischer, Lila Fal and Farida Wolf who lived in Kenya, South Africa, and USA respectively (January 2023).
22. Author's discussions with Khadidja (2018–2019) and with two of her long-time embroiderers (March–April 2023). The embroiderers prefer to stay anonymous.
23. Khadidja devoted two large rooms from her home in Algiers to her atelier. One was set as a sewing studio, where she stored the materials, cut, and sew, and one room was reserved for the embroiderers, who sat on floor mattresses and cushions in a circle with their work, allowing them to interact comfortably with each other.
24. In this audio recording (Hamsi 2018), Khadidja talks about her first customers in the late 1970s (minutes 00:04:51–00:05:36).
25. At the 'Festival de la robe Kabyle' event (April 2018, audio recording, minutes: 00:17:39–00:18:16), Djoher Amhis relates this anecdote: 'I recall an exhibition at the residence of the Spanish ambassador [in 1983]. A guest ambassador stood in extasy in front of a dress. He begged Khadidja and was ready to acquire it at any cost, but that was impossible; this dress belonged to a private collection. He was incredibly disappointed because he saw something other than embroidery in this dress. He saw art'.
26. Author's discussion with Khadidja on topic of setting up a website or a Facebook page (Spring 2016).

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